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Defining the Heathen in Ireland and Africa

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The motivation of missionaries has, of necessity, to assume that change is desirable, that they possess something valuable which will be beneficial to the populations they address. Because this is the premise on which the endeavour is based, any contact is, from the missionary point of view, a meeting of two unequal cultures. The potential of the 'contact zone', described by Mary Louise Pratt, which highlights the possibility for exciting and positive consequences when two disparate cultures meet and engage,¹ is lost when one culture is, by its own definition, by its very presence, defining itself as superior, when its only motivation is to convert, to replace significant elements of the other culture, in this case, the spiritual, with its own.

The work of Irish missionaries has achieved almost mythical status in Irish popular culture; names like St Brendan and St Columbanus are evoked to stir national pride, and more recent involvement in the 'foreign missions' remains central to the identity of the Catholic Church in Ireland. A subject about which less is known, is the religious/spiritual colonisation to which the Irish Catholics were subjected in the nineteenth century, in the form of British Protestant missions. In Ireland, attempts were made to proselytise the Catholic population, especially around the time of the famine (1840s) and, in contemporaneous accounts, the 'Popish' or 'Romish' targets of the evangelists are represented in terms typically used by the coloniser of the colonised. It is a discourse which succeeds in emphasising difference while establishing a cultural and moral supremacy, and an implied authority on the part of the coloniser/missionary. Less than one hundred years later, in the 1920s and 1930s, we find that the 'second spring' of Irish Catholic missionary activity, the aim of which was to convert the pagan world, employed remarkably similar forms of representation to describe the indigenous populations of the various countries to which the Irish missionaries traveled. It might be expected that the discourse of Irish Catholic missionaries in the twentieth century, coming from a country which had experienced colonial oppression, would in their interaction with other colonised peoples, have displayed a consciousness of that shared experience. In fact, their discourse mirrors more closely the discourse of the proselytizers, or the discourse of a colonising power, drawing on many aspects of what might be termed 'imperial discourse'.

Missionary Discourse

The various texts that emerged from the missions, were largely produced for propaganda purposes and this has to be taken into account in any assessment of the material. However, while an appreciation of this aspect of the discourse is essential in order to understand the motivation of the writer, it also has significance in that it influences the type of material produced in such circumstances. As a means of attracting finance and recruits, it is understandable that texts would include an amount of exaggeration and thrilling detail. It has also meant that these discourses tend to be internally cohesive in spite of a number of basic contradictory and ambivalent

¹ Pratt, M. L., *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992:6.

elements, and the body of work, encompassing all cultural projections of the missionary endeavour, carries, therefore, a great weight of authority and a correspondingly strong influence on public perceptions of the subject, which it might otherwise lack. Pratt draws attention to the 'immense flexibility of this normalising, homogenising rhetoric of inequality' which has the capacity to '[tolerate] all manner of contradiction'.²

These missionary efforts to spread civilisation and Christianity (apparently inextricably linked) were based largely on a notion that the benighted target populations had no religion which was deserving of the name and that their poor living conditions, laziness, and immoral behaviour were bound up in their state of religious ignorance, or worse, their affiliation to a false god or gods. These heathens were seen to be in a moral and cultural vacuum and, despite evidence to the contrary, a predominantly oral culture was assumed to signify an absence of both real culture and real history. Any history that was acknowledged, was described in terms of savagery and war and lacked any sense of motivation or political content; there was often an implication that such history would best be forgotten. Whitney commented that a history dependent on oral culture, was a blank or should be, '[...] they have no pride in it; they wish to cast it aside, and adopt the speech of the European'. He concluded that it was '[a]ll for the best - the past of this country must have been dark - very dark'.³ Discussing African morality, O'Cullen uses a pseudo-intellectual reference to pass judgement: 'Ethnographers will tell us that the moral standard of a people will always be on a par with their political, economical, and intellectual levels, none of which have ever existed for the pagan tribes amongst whom we, Catholic missionaries, are toiling'. He dismisses their past history as 'one of internecine tribal strife, slave raiding and wholesale massacres [...] a savage state of existence'.⁴

The difficulty with these assumptions and with the manner in which they are presented is what is unsaid or ignored. Commentary on the Irish situation, in the West of Ireland in the late 1840s, largely ignores the economic issues which caused the famine, and dwells instead on the consequences: extreme poverty and the subsequent social disintegration. The dirt, ragged clothing, and generally pitiful state of the population are rarely explained in terms other than a lack of civilisation and an implied incapability of achieving any higher standard of living or hygiene due, presumably, to ignorance and a heathen religion. Around 1850, the appearance of the people of Oughterard (in County Galway) is described as 'squalid, and, in not a few instances, loathsome in the extreme';⁵ the disgusted writer expresses no pity or outrage. A few miles further on, the same group encounters a congregation that includes 'several manly-looking and comfortably dressed men' with 'open countenances and lively manners', some of whom are 'uncommonly stout looking'.⁶ There is no critical assessment of how this situation might have come about, nor any element of wonder at such inequality.

Deserted villages are described as eyesores, rather than as evidence of an economic and human catastrophe: Howard noted that 'the ruins of a deserted village strike the eye unpleasantly, and should be removed'.⁷ Uncultivated ground is evidence of a 'lack of industry'; there is no effort to discuss the effects of absentee

² Ibid.:153.

³ Whitney, P. J., *An Irish Missionary in Central Africa*, Dublin: Talbot Press, 1922:30-1.

⁴ O'Cullen, Padraig, 'African Morality', *The African Missionary*, 81(September-October 1927):96.

⁵ Gregg, Rev. John, *A Missionary Visit to Connemara and Other Parts of the County of Galway*, Tracts on Popery no. 21 (c. 1850):12.

⁶ Ibid.:15.

⁷ Howard, J. E., *The Island of Saints or Ireland in 1855*, London, 1855:171.

landlords and the abysmal position of poor tenant farmers. An American woman named Asenath Nicholson, who travelled around Ireland, was primarily interested in observing the social conditions of the Irish, but also engaged in a minor amount of tract distribution. She was treated with suspicion by the other missionaries, and eventually condemned in a local newspaper, the *Achill Herald*, for creating ‘a spirit of discontent among the lower orders’, because she drew attention to the economic and social inequality which she found.⁸

Irish missionary representations of Africa devalue all forms of native religion, culture, and social organisation as primitive and underdeveloped. Poverty is again assumed to be due to the natural laziness of the population (particularly the men), rather than economic conditions. There is rarely appreciation of cultural forms which cannot be assessed in European terms; there is little acknowledgement of the triumph of social adaptation which has enabled people to live in these various challenging habitats. Despite the availability of anthropological material which described the complex and developed cultures which the missionaries would encounter, it was not until the early 1970s that Irish missionaries received any training or information of this type before going on the missions. Having received the same education as a priest who was destined for a rural parish in Ireland, it is not surprising that these young missionaries had no intellectual framework to deal with their experiences and encounters with the ‘other’. Occasionally an individual does appear to engage with African culture in a positive and appreciative manner, but these would be the exceptions. Missionary magazines in particular, which by their nature consist of articles from a variety of sources, can contain quite contradictory attitudes, even within one issue. Of course, once the value of existing tradition and culture is acknowledged, the whole premise behind the missionary enterprise becomes less convincing, the key and absolutely essential element to the project is certainty, and that is best achieved and maintained by creating a Manichean dichotomy - good: bad, Christian: pagan, civilised: savage.

The use of contrast to illustrate the distance between the missionary and the heathen is applied broadly to everything from the personal hygiene and intelligence of the subject to representations of the landscape, which he or she inhabits. Keeping in mind that the focus of the material is to interest people in the missions, to attract vocations and money (and prayer) in support of the project, there is a fine balance to be struck, the reader must be titillated yet not terrified. It is necessary to offend the sensibilities of the civilised audience, yet not to disgust. Due to Africa’s reputation as ‘the White Man’s Grave’ for a previous generation of missionaries, the Irish texts are particularly sensitive to the reactions of parents of potential missionaries. The occasional hint of unspeakable, indescribable practices makes a strong impression, without the need to give details or fabricate false information. Consequently, exaggeration, selective reporting, intentional mis-representation of a custom or practice, and straightforward ignorance combine to inspire horror, pity or indignation. Sometimes quite ridiculous criticisms are made, after which there is an attempt to reduce the effect of the condemnation. Howard, for example, mentions the ‘barefoot condition of the [Irish] women’ as ‘something repulsive’, but continues, ‘All this is merely conventional, and people can be quite as good Christians without shoes as we in England with them’.⁹ However, the word repulsive has been employed, another

⁸ Nicholson, Asenath, *The Bible in Ireland: Ireland’s Welcome to the Stranger or Excursions through Ireland in 1844 and 1845 for the Purposes of Personally Investigating the Condition of the Poor*, ed. Alfred Tresidder Sheppard, Dublin, 1847.

⁹ Howard, *Island of Saints*, op.cit.:97-8.

negative image has been invoked to add to all the others. Sometimes a story is related as if the norm, then the 'example' is qualified with a statement such as, 'This, of course, was a case of exceptional cruelty'.¹⁰ Or after a detailed account of what is described as a superstitious practice, a 'proof by poison', as 'bestly cruelty', the author admits that 'such extravagant outbursts of passion are rare'.¹¹ Descriptions of practices which, if they ever existed, have long since disappeared are given; for example, a reference to an idol to which (it is said) the Irish sacrificed the first born of every species, links this practice to contemporary 'idolatry'.¹² Other references have lost their power to instill fear and horror in the reader: herbal medicine does not have quite the same mysterious and terrifying implications today as it did in 1955 when it was mentioned in the same sentence as the sacrifice of animals to placate an evil spirit.¹³ All these textual and narrative practices combine towards what Edward Said has called the 'strategic formation' of a convincing account of reality.¹⁴

Missionary texts take many forms. The Proselytising texts are often in the form of travel narratives, one is even a guide to visitors, which provides a map and an account of how to travel between the various mission locations, which are incidentally, settlements called colonies, and describing what they may expect to find in each case. This *Mission Tour Book* exploits the Victorian interest in travelling with a purpose.¹⁵ In this case, the purpose is a close inspection of some native Irish, who have undergone the process of civilisation and the opportunity to make a comparison between these and the wild variety of the species. While the Irish accounts of Africa are not encouraging tourism, they take a similar form, describing landscape, modes of travel (invariably traumatic, uncomfortable and dangerous), the existing mission stations and the improvements which have been made. They are directed at potential missionaries rather than tourists. Elements of adventure writing creep in, including, for example, descriptions of encounters with wild animals; this is typical imperial boyhood material and titles reflect this tendency.¹⁶ Promoting a missionary career as an adventure is a common strategy, but then the missionary organisations rather ingenuously complain that the enterprise is too often 'regarded as a foolhardy attempt of reckless and quixotic daring'.¹⁷ Biographies too, shed light on the personal experiences and attitudes of individuals who played a leading role in establishing and maintaining missions, for example the Revd Dallas in the West of Ireland and Fr Shanahan in Nigeria. Histories provide useful dates and statistics, but are published retrospectively so have a different role in the discourse.

The internal cohesiveness of each collection of texts is striking and the two discourses share similar content. Given the common intention and motivation of both groups of missionaries, it should not be unexpected that the discourses would have many shared elements. They are discourses which define identity in terms of 'self' and 'other'. By being written, published, and distributed that authority and power is further stabilised. Also, it is evident that they share many elements with other non-

¹⁰ Leen, Rev. Edward, 'Nigeria Calling – For Irish Doctors', *Studies*, vol. XXXII (March 1943), 1-24: 8.

¹¹ Harrington, Rev. P., 'An Ordeal: The Practice of Sasswood', *Pagan Missions*, III (March 1924), 27-32:32.

¹² Howard, *Island of Saints*, op.cit.:180.

¹³ Sr Mary Anastasia, 'Growth of Medical Work on the Missions', *Capuchin Annual*, 1955:364-370, 365.

¹⁴ Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon, 1978:20.

¹⁵ Dallas, A.R.C., *A Mission Tour Book in Ireland*, Dublin, 1860.

¹⁶ Mellett, Fr James CSSp, *If Any Man Dare: Missionary Memoirs*, Dublin: Fallons, 1963.

¹⁷ Editorial, *The African Missionary*, 84 (March-April 1928):141.

missionary, colonial texts, and that their methods of defining the 'other' relate closely to definitions of other found in the various texts of Empire including fiction, adventure writing, travel writing and biography. What is perhaps surprising is that one hundred years apart, two discourses would share so many common elements.

It is not unexpected that the Proselytizing material from the 1850s would include discussion of subjects which are indicative of Victorian concerns, for example hygiene, separation of public/private space, and racial hierarchies. However it is surprising that these issues recur in the Irish material on Africa. It seems that these Victorian concerns have become established tropes in constructing self and 'other' in an opposition of civilised self and savage other and it appears that the Irish church is quite comfortable using this, the established language/discourse of colonialism.

The contrast of darkness and light is one of those recurring themes, both metaphorically regarding the darkness of pagan beliefs, superstition and civilisation and also in real terms of skin colour, or dirt in the Irish case. The gloom of landscapes and of dwellings is described too. Hygiene is another theme, good hygiene, as we all know, being next to godliness, the implication being that the opposite also holds true. Domestication and transmitting ideas of hygiene were obviously part of the civilisation process but an additional facet to the debate is the association of disease and sin. The [African] natives are described as 'scourged with disease and superstition' as if the two were inseparable or at least have some causal relationship.¹⁸ In Africa, ignorance is related to disease, 'they know nothing of bacilli and microbes',¹⁹ but another source describes a common affliction, 'yaws', which produces unsightly sores as 'the symptoms of evil living, either personal or ancestral'.²⁰ However a medical opinion dryly declares that 'if yaws were a venereal disease, there would be little hope for the salvation of the Nigerian'.²¹ In Ireland, Howard pondered the question whether the lack of 'claneness' of the Irish is due to 'race or religion/Or both?'.²² Issues of decency were important for the missionaries. The ragged clothing of the poor Irish raised issues of decency; comfort and warmth were a secondary issue, if a concern at all. When Bishop Shanahan set up his first school in Ogboli, Southern Nigeria, his only supplies were slates, pencils and spare sheets for making trousers.²³ The children's page in the magazine *African Missionary*, under a heading 'Love and Knickers', appealed for 'dresses and knickers for our little and big black cousins in Africa'.²⁴ Sartorial matters were irrelevant, as is evident from another appeal, which stated: 'Any colour will do, the brighter the better, and the legs need not be the same colour, only they should be roomy enough'.²⁵ This emphasis on clothing was questioned by others; another voice insisted that: 'Clothes

¹⁸ Prof. Henry Moore, in Edward Leen CSSp, 'Nigeria Calling – for Irish Doctors', *Studies*, vol. XXXII (March 1943):1-24, 14.

¹⁹ Leen, *ibid.*:4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*:5.

²¹ Barnes, Dr Joseph, in Leen, *ibid.*: 24.

²² Howard, *Island of Saints*, *op.cit.*:17.

²³ Jordan, John P. CSSp, *Bishop Shanahan of Southern Nigeria: The Life of the Great Apostle of the Igbo Tribe and Founder of the Missionary Sisters, Killeshandra 1871-1943*, Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds, 1949:22.

²⁴ A quote from a letter from the Sacred Heart School, Leeson Street on the Children's Page of *The African Missionary*, 86 (July-August 1928):199.

²⁵ O'Flynn, Rev. M., 'Knickers in Nigeria', *The African Missionary*, XIV (February 1936):30.

have not made the man but merely demonstrated the fraud. Beneath the loud tie and striped shirt still beats the heart of the savage'.²⁶

Physical environment

The landscape and the physical environment generally, are often described as initially hostile but undergo changes as the people are converted. Before the arrival of Christianity the landscape is inherently evil, under the control of Satan, and unwelcoming, as are the people. In a heathen place, not alone are the people 'other', the landscape, buildings and even nature are threatening, more primitive and more out of control than in civilised society. The terrain and its inhabitants share these qualities and as the land is brought under control and cultivated, so the people are tamed, civilised, and Christianised. Fr James, an Irish missionary in Africa describes a sunset, the ultimate romantic cliché, in violent and intimidating language: 'For hours that sun will hold its place until the veldt goes suddenly to flames and a fire, like a devouring demon, races wildly along the hill sides'. The landscape is of 'appalling magnitude',²⁷ and even a mountain is portrayed as essentially aggressive as it 'invades the sky'.²⁸ The same writer implies that human neglect or ignorance has left its mark on the environment: 'the country was depressing [...] villages [...] situated right on the verge of swamps and were filthy', huts circular and 'badly made'.²⁹ A very similar description of a 'bedraggled landscape, 'uncared for orchard', and 'dirty and smelly' towns is given by Lupton.³⁰ Fr James also describes 'a few huts and kraals [...] huddled together', implying a lack of order or planning, but also giving a sense of vulnerability, of their being under attack.³¹

The ideal is clearly described by Fr Edward Leen; Emekuku, is a veritable oasis, there are shrubs, hedge, and a gravel path. He continues, 'It was like being set down in a corner of Ireland'.³² He does not appear to consider that this might be a little inappropriate considering the location and he obviously has in mind a different corner of Ireland than that experienced by the Proselytisers in their encounters with the landscape, which will be described shortly. However, occasionally it is acknowledged that point of view can affect perception. In a short work of fiction, entitled 'The Black Lure: The Strange Story of a Missionary Who Wept for a Pagan God', it is suggested that 'the dark mysterious mangrove forests full of creeping and crawling horrors, must in time become as familiar as Irish haystacks'.³³ Another Irishman, Fr Mellett describes his first view of a village, Enugu, surrounded by 'towering peaks' with a 'dark coal-like surface that made them a fitting symbol for the paganism which seemed entrenched in the district'. He then goes on, 'Seen now, in what might be called a Catholic setting, they gave a different impression, one that might be evoked in Kerry and Connemara'.³⁴

²⁶ Flynn, Rev. J., 'The Effect of Christianity on Primitive Peoples', *Pagan Missions*, VI (September 1927):94.

²⁷ 'Fr James' (O'Mahony), OFM, Cap., *African Adventure*, Dublin: the Father Mathew Record Office, 1936:61.

²⁸ Ibid.: 81.

²⁹ Ibid.:132.

³⁰ Lupton, Rev. J., 'Visiting Outstations', *The African Missionary*, 80 (July-August 1927): 4-5.

³¹ 'Fr James', op.cit.:143.

³² Leen, Edward, 'In the Heart of Nigeria', *Pagan Missions*, I, 1(March 1922):16.

³³ O'Flaherty, J.C., 'The Black Lure: The Strange Story of a Missionary who Wept for a Pagan God', *The African Missionary*, 80 (July-August 1927):67.

³⁴ Mellett, Fr James CSSp, *If Any Man Dare*, op.cit:64.

In relation to Connemara, the emphasis of the Proselytizers when describing the physical environment is the distinction between the ‘wild’ and the ‘settled/cultivated’. There is an assumption that control over the environment is emblematic of civilisation and Christianity. They are disturbed by an inhabited landscape that is not domesticated. Howard speaks approvingly of ‘the sides of a once barren mountain [which] are now adorned with cultivated fields or gardens’.³⁵ And on entering Achill, a ‘wild island, covered with desolate looking heaths’, he was ‘cheered by the sight of an English settler’s house, around which symptoms of cultivation were manifesting themselves, fields and plantations causing the wilderness to rejoice’.³⁶ The landscape, as much as its inhabitants is a victim of the godless situation. The countryside is ‘pestered with stones’. A Wesleyan settlement is perceived as a ‘little oasis in the desert’.³⁷ ‘Neat and pleasing’ is the ultimate accolade, the opposite combination of adjectives is ‘wild and uninteresting’,³⁸ and he is extremely critical of what he terms ‘neglected ruins’. The green fields (of Saxon cultivation) are contrasted with the bleak Irish mountainside, much as the new converts are contrasted with the heathens. The Revd Dallas chose Moyrus in Connemara for a mission as ‘being the farthest removed from the civilized world’, ‘a *terra incognita*, in a state of heathen darkness’.³⁹ A map produced for the Tour book shows ‘only those buildings which have been erected or [...] have been hired, to carry on the operations of the Irish Church Missions to the Roman Catholics’, that is, no buildings prior to 1841 are shown, so a *terra nullius*, as well as *incognita*.

The standard of buildings, both domestic and institutional is presented as a measure of civilisation. One Irish house is ‘so dark and smoky that it is only by slow degrees we discern the occupants of the Cimmerian abode [...] floor, covered with the moss of the mountain [...] some erections [...] like those built in England for the inferior creatures’.⁴⁰ Here the distinction between indoor and outdoor is blurred by the presence of moss on the floor, and it is implied that the inhabitants are living like animals. The adjective Cimmerian is carefully chosen: of darkness, night; people fabled to live in perpetual darkness. The poor Irish habitations are also compared to African kraals - ‘deplorable cabins [...] like an African kraal the door was so low’ and when Nicholson reaches Lord Bantry’s gate house, she remarks that it is ‘such a contrast to the den I had just left, that I felt I was still within the reach of something human’.⁴¹ Again in Achill, Nicholson compares the neat white cabins of the colony with the ‘huddled kraals of rough stone’.⁴² The lack of a street plan is not always presented in negative terms; in Africa, Leen, consistently one of the more favourable commentators, comments that it is indicative of the ‘individuality of native character’.⁴³ And it seems that various degrees of civilisation are discernible to the practised eye. Travelling towards Sligo, Howard notes what he describes as ‘wretched hovels’ but adds that ‘some cottages [are] the patterns of neatness and comfort, perhaps of English or Scotch residents, and many intermediate, possibly of converts’.

³⁵ Howard, *Island of Saints*, op.cit.:175.

³⁶ Ibid.:162.

³⁷ Ibid.:83.

³⁸ Ibid.:171, 190.

³⁹ Dallas, (Mrs), *Incidents in the Life and Ministry of the Reverend Alex R. C. Dallas A. M.*, by his widow (London, 1871):426.

⁴⁰ Howard, *Island of Saints*, op. cit.:55.

⁴¹ Nicholson, *The Bible in Ireland*, op. cit.:182.

⁴² Ibid.:255.

⁴³ Leen, ‘In the Heart of Nigeria’, op.cit.:18.

He describes what he means by an ‘intermediate state - very clean for Irish, but not clean enough for English taste’.⁴⁴

In Africa, the Irish rejected local building materials and methods, insisting on building with brick. Bricks had to be handmade and in Nigeria, under Bishop Shanahan’s stewardship, each was stamped with a shamrock.⁴⁵ The flaw in the construction of such permanent buildings was demonstrated in one instance when, immediately following the building of a school at Momba, the chief and the entire village had to move twenty miles away due to a ‘plague’ of locusts which had stripped the area and the subsequent threat of starvation.⁴⁶ Buildings for religious use were a focus for criticism too. The two discourses employ different strategies, but both share the assumption that the quality of one’s church buildings is an index of the church’s strength and permanence. As a criticism of the Catholic Church in Ireland, Dallas describes a Roman Catholic chapel as having ‘a mean and cabin like appearance’.⁴⁷ In Africa, an Irish missionary comments that he cannot but make a comparison between the beautiful edifices in Cork city ‘and the tumbledown mud huts which act as shelters for our Divine Lord in this poor pagan land’.⁴⁸ Another church in West Africa is described as a ‘cattle shed’.⁴⁹ It is suggested that ‘Judging by appearances, Our Divine Lord is the biggest tramp and the worst housed beggar that ever lived in a Bohaneen in Ireland’.⁵⁰ These descriptions are followed by appeals for funds to build churches in Africa. Existing inadequate buildings are described as ‘miserable hovel[s]’, and a sketch on the children’s page of a rickety grass-roofed mud hut, captioned ‘Is this a fitting home for Jesus? If you saw it you would call it a cattle shed it looks so little like a church’, exploits the assumption that the buildings are representative of the church’s status and that of the Irish missionaries. Alongside these descriptions are accounts of traditional forms of house building and farming techniques, which seem to belie the references to laziness and absence of culture and history, which are made elsewhere.

The implication that there is another dimension to the landscape, a supernatural power – in Africa’s case the ‘great lure’ – is a suggestion of its magnetic qualities. Villages, which were converted and then neglected, ‘seemed to straggle out of sight to hug their darkness’.⁵¹ Plunket mentions Protestant colonists ‘gradually absorbed and lost in the Romanism by which they are surrounded’.⁵² It is as if the landscape conspires with the dark forces to reverse the process of civilisation and Conversion.

Animal-like and Wild

Throughout the two discourses a variety of insinuations are made which suggest that the native populations are animal-like. For example the use of verbs usually associated with animals, including swarming, scurrying and flocking. Obviously one

⁴⁴ Howard, *Island of Saints*, op. cit.:197.

⁴⁵ Jordan, *Bishop Shanahan*, op.cit.:146.

⁴⁶ ‘Fr James’, *African Adventure*, op.cit.:135.

⁴⁷ Dallas, A.R.C., *A Mission Tour Book*, op.cit.:24.

⁴⁸ McSweeney, Fr. E., letter: ‘Church Needs in Africa’, *The African Missionary*, 84 (March-April 1928):156.

⁴⁹ ‘Auntie’s Playground’, *The African Missionary*, VII, 1(January 1929):18.

⁵⁰ ‘Miceal’, letter in ‘Auntie’s Playground’, *The African Missionary*, 91(March 1929):58.

⁵¹ ‘Fr James’, *African Adventure*, op.cit.:18.

⁵² Plunket, Revd. W. C., *A Short Visit to the Connemara Mission: A Letter*, 1863:44.

can be over-sensitive, but the accumulation of such terminology does tend to reinforce the message. Sustained and consistent references are made, which imply that the natives are closer to an animal species than to the civilised human missionaries. Aesthetic appreciation of the 'natives' in their natural habitat has a patronising tone. On a journey in East Africa, a missionary mentions the 'antelope and giraffe - beautiful wild beasts' and continues, 'but the most beautiful thing I saw was a fully dressed Mgogo man striding through the sand and scrub patches'.⁵³ Other comments made by Irish missionaries in Africa include Fr James noting that crocodiles prefer 'dogs and natives' to Europeans.⁵⁴ He also describes children 'scurrying like rabbits'.⁵⁵ Whitney remarks that in the schools, boys become 'tamed'.⁵⁶ In Ireland, a 'native' is described guiding a group up the mountain with 'elastic bounds, barefoot [...] almost [emulating] those of a mountain goat'.⁵⁷ In Oughterard (Co. Galway), the starving people snatched bread like 'half-famished hounds in a kennel'.⁵⁸ Later in the same piece we read the following: 'Indeed, at Clifden Castle, we saw 2 very nice children running about the lawn, quite happy and comfortable, more ornamental far than peacocks or guinea hens'.⁵⁹ It seems every garden would benefit from the picturesque presence of a couple of rescued and civilised famine orphans.

Physical proximity to animals is described too. In Connemara, in a 'rather comfortable cottage [...] hairy pigs [...] walking around and amongst our sitting party'.⁶⁰ It is suggested that the young craythers of the family sleep 'crush[ed] together with fowls'.⁶¹ Even the word 'crayther' (creature), used as a term of endearment in Ireland, is here employed in a de-humanising context. Children in an orphanage were formerly 'like the wild goats on the mountains'.⁶² And the aversion to the workhouse is explained as due to the fact that the Irish 'do not wear confinement well', rather like wild animals.⁶³

Other, more sympathetic texts of the period also relate the animal-like living conditions of the famine victims but, in the context, it seems an accurate, outraged description of the de-humanising consequences of poverty and famine. There is not the implication, present in the proselytising texts, that the conditions are appropriate to the heathen, animal-like Irish population; an assumption that it is either by choice or national character that people live in such conditions. To dismiss such poverty as illustrative of pagan, uncivilised racial characteristics is an easy alternative to accepting the reality of failed economic policy and the resulting inequality.

Often encounters with the people changed initial expectations of savagery and primitivism but only to pity, paternalism and mild amusement. Exploiting ignorance of technology, impressing with gramophones and motorbikes and instigating shame regarding traditional beliefs were all part of the missionary project. The 'wildness' of Africans is illustrated by descriptions of native dancing. At a village dance, the rhythm is 'maddening syncopated stamping, monotonous but riotous and gradually swelling with centuries of accumulated passion. Africa is sinister when it dances'.⁶⁴

⁵³ Wilson, 'Wanderings in Bagamayo', *Pagan Missions*, IV(June 1925):87-8.

⁵⁴ 'Fr James', *African Adventure*, op.cit.:141.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*:158.

⁵⁶ Whitney, *An Irish Missionary*, op.cit.:58.

⁵⁷ Howard, *Island of Saints*, op.cit.:141.

⁵⁸ Gregg, *A Missionary Visit to Connemara*, op.cit.:12.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*:26.

⁶⁰ Howard, *Island of Saints*, op.cit.:97.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*: 55.

⁶² *Ibid.*:106.

⁶³ *Ibid.*:171.

⁶⁴ 'Fr James', *African Adventure*, op.cit.:62.

The singing too is loud and noisy, heathens apparently can't hold a tune, and is variously described as 'violent and voluminous',⁶⁵ and a 'hearty vociferous discord'.⁶⁶ When not threatening, the 'natives' were often described as childlike. Leen's remarks that 'Around us, looking wonderfully picturesque in this native setting, played the blacks, both young and old, light-hearted and happy',⁶⁷ have a strong affiliation with the stereotypical 'friendly and affectionate Irish peasant'. And it is apparent that a race which 'has preserved the infantile characteristics of the species'⁶⁸ is unlikely to be capable of providing a parenting role, or of self-government. The practice of infantilisation is particularly ironic - the missionaries created alternative families, taking the parental role unto themselves, but in the process they were responsible for destroying families as they had existed previously. The practice of removing children from their homes was common in both missionary projects, as family and community were understood to be bad influences. From the parents' perspective, education provided by missionaries is often a double-edged sword; while it provides access to material advantage, it inevitably creates a gulf between generations, particularly if it is breaking with traditional methods and introducing culturally alien concepts. From the missionary perspective, when children were separated from adults, the process of transmission of culture was lost, and as this included elements of pagan religion and cultural practices, this was seen as success. Both groups of missionaries were in agreement that children were more easily converted, especially when separated from their families. So orphans or else children that could be taken away from the bad influence of their parents and community were preferred; hence the establishment of orphanages and boarding schools. In Ireland, Howard claimed that the best policy regarding children was 'to place them where the priests cannot get them; and to rear them as plants for the Lord, safe in the Nursery, to be planted out afterwards'.⁶⁹ Children who had been in a 'dreadful state' were now 'looking well and healthy' and with 'clean and tidy clothes'. Formerly in ignorance, they had only been educated with 'knowledge of evil - to worship the virgin and practice idolatry, like the heathens'.⁷⁰ In Africa, Whitney noted that the 'little fellows are sterling examples of the church militant' in the struggle against parents and juju men.⁷¹ Jordan described the children as tiny apostles in pagan homes and declared that 'the school provided the best solution to the whole problem of taming and evangelising the natives'.⁷² The strategy was to reach the children before they came under the influence of others.

Racial Debate

While there is evidence of attempts to engage with debates regarding race and evolution, usually in an effort to be constructive or positive, these discussions often reflect badly on the writer as they tend to expose his ignorance or his own biases. Writing in Kenya, the Rev. J. Flynn, noted that 'We are saturated through and through with the conviction that the black man is of an inferior race, and our treatment of him has been influenced by this biased attitude. Inferior at present he certainly is, but shall

⁶⁵ Whitney, *An Irish Missionary*, op.cit.:62.

⁶⁶ Plunket, *A Short Visit*, op.cit.:32.

⁶⁷ Leen, 'In the Heart of Nigeria', op.cit.:18.

⁶⁸ Flynn, 'The Effect of Christianity on Native Peoples', op.cit.:93.

⁶⁹ Howard, *The Island of Saints*, op.cit.:102.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*:105-7.

⁷¹ Whitney, *An Irish Missionary*, op.cit.: 71.

⁷² Jordan, *Bishop Shanahan*, op.cit.:32,44.

he always remain so?' There were discussions about 'the psychology of the native', and it was surmised that 'he has no sense of altruism, no natural leaning towards solidarity. The only person in the world in whom he is seriously interested is himself'.⁷³ Other Irish writers described the 'natives' as 'Darwin's missing links perhaps'⁷⁴, but it was generally agreed that the native 'will someday [...] be a worthy citizen of Africa and the world', due to Catholic missionary intervention.⁷⁵

Commentators on the Irish held the same faith in the possibility of change. Plunket commented: 'Look at the shape of his head; they will say - 'remember the race from which he comes [...] the more I see [...] the more I feel convinced that the shape of an Irishman's head is no greater obstacle in the way of his social and religious reformation than the shape of his swallow-tailed coat'.⁷⁶ The same writer acknowledged 'the power which the Gospel possesses for correcting the truthlessness and servility which some people would consider the inseparable characteristics of the Irish Celt'.⁷⁷

Representatives of both missionary projects speak in condescending terms of the native, assuming his inferiority. They make frequent references to his closeness to animals and his animal characteristics. They criticise his lack of culture, history and dismiss any evidence to the contrary. They describe his traditions as uncivilised. They then proceed to criticise his servility and his lack of pride in himself as innate characteristics. The shame they induce is both a manifestation of their success and a justification for their presence. There are repeated references to the capitulation of people who cease to defend their traditions and their separate identity. Howard describes cairns of stones built by the people to commemorate the dead, which he says represent souls in purgatory, and remarks that 'people began to be ashamed of superstition' and dismantled these cairns.⁷⁸ In Africa, Revd H Ahaus remarks that the natives 'feel the terrible weight of their degradation' and that they have a 'supreme desire to rise in every way to a higher level [...] They feel ashamed of their own backwardness'.⁷⁹ James describes 'a people so inferior in their own eyes as to think themselves neglected, if not cursed by the Sovereign Lord of all'. He doesn't acknowledge that this sense of inferiority has been imposed: 'In a thousand ways they unconsciously proclaim their shame of the blackness of their skins, and in general look up to the white man who respects himself'.⁸⁰

The saved are apparently models of good hygiene and improved intelligence; their very appearance changes as they undergo conversion. Missionaries claim to be able to distinguish Christians from 'less fortunate Brethren'. 'The grace of Baptism works a wonderful transformation in their features'.⁸¹ In Ireland, Plunket compares the rescued orphans' 'bright, intelligent, independent faces with the vacant, servile countenances of the untaught peasant children'. The 'saved' are 'eager', with 'chubby faces' and described as 'bright, tidy, happy'.⁸² Howard mentions the 'nice cheerful looking, well-behaved boys, days work over, polite [...] coming from the Protestant

⁷³ Leen, 'A Busy Fortnight', *Pagan Missions*, II(Dec 1923):120.

⁷⁴ 'The Provincial', 'An Apostolic Round', *The African Missionary*, 86(July-August 1928):184.

⁷⁵ Slattery, Very Rev. M., 'The Capital of an African Wonderland', *The African Missionary*, 84(March-April 1928):154.

⁷⁶ Plunket, *A Short Visit*, op.cit.:25-6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*:25.

⁷⁸ Howard, *Island of Saints*, op.cit.:45.

⁷⁹ Ahaus, Rev. H., *The Harvest Fields: The Pagan Missions of Today*, CTSI Pamphlet 1264, Dublin, 1934.

⁸⁰ James, *African Adventure*, op.cit.:187.

⁸¹ Leen, 'In the Heart of Nigeria', op.cit.:18.

⁸² Plunket, *A Short Visit*, op.cit.:23-5.

schoolhouse’;⁸³ there is a clear contrast with his earlier reference to ‘childer’ squatting by the fire with animals.⁸⁴ The wonderful change that occurs when individuals are converted is described by Irish missionaries in Africa, with reference to the native Catechumens who work all day and then study in the evening: it is ‘remarkable [...] these men, who, a short while before, were running naked and wild in their own tribe lands’.⁸⁵ Three men being ordained are described as ‘three of Africa’s dusky children [...] who have set their faces against centuries of paganism, and have fled from the superstitious orgies of their forefathers’.⁸⁶

Superstition

Superstition is the arena of the Catholic priest according to one discourse, while the other grants it to the African witchdoctor. The priests are described as controlling, powerful, feared, and in an exploitative position in both contexts. Fear of these tyrannical priests is blamed for any resistance to the missionary project. In Ireland, the idolaters are chained to fetishism and worship of nature, under the control of ‘the Romish priest [...] palming upon them for religion weak and puerile superstitions, such as would scarcely find a parallel on the banks of the Ganges’.⁸⁷ In fact, ‘Galway is infested with priests’ in almost undisturbed possession of a large population ‘engrossed in darkness’.⁸⁸ The practice of confession fetters ‘their souls with Rome’s strongest chains of darkness’.⁸⁹ A pamphlet, ‘Itinerating Work’, refers to the ‘long reign of darkness and superstition’, and Dallas laments the ‘spiritual desolation and moral degradation of Ireland’.⁹⁰ Belief in ‘fairies, ghosts, and hobgoblins’ is described as ‘another sad remnant of popery’.⁹¹ In Achill, the schoolmaster had worn a scapular ‘to keep him [...] from devils and fairies, from diseases, and misfortunes of every kind’.⁹² There is mention of idolatry involving a ‘large wooden doll’,⁹³ holy wells ‘such centres of attraction for the superstitious Romanist’,⁹⁴ and the wafer.⁹⁵

‘Romanism’ in Ireland is ‘a strange mixture of the *horrible* and the *ludicrous*’.⁹⁶ He describes the practice of ‘Swearing by Slievemore’ as ‘Fetishism’ and remarks that they also ‘worshipped a stone altar at the foot of Slievemore, which they tumbled down last year as another useless piece of idolatry [...] have made considerable advances’.⁹⁷ In a letter, Middleton draws attention to the exact conformity between Popery and Paganism: the ‘whole form and outward dress of their worship seemed so grossly idolatrous and extravagant beyond what I had imagined

⁸³ Howard, *Island of Saints*, op.cit.:160.

⁸⁴ Ibid.:97.

⁸⁵ Gogarty, Rev. H.A., *In the Land of the Kikuyus*, Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1920:24.

⁸⁶ O’Haire, Rev. A., ‘Ordinations in Lagos’, *The African Missionary*, 90(February 1929):34.

⁸⁷ Dallas, *A Mission Tour Book*, op.cit.:43.

⁸⁸ Marrable, Rev. William, *The Rise and Progress of the Irish Church Missionary Society Being a Series of Letters which Appeared in ‘The Christian Examiner’ from January-August 1850* (Dublin, 1850), letter written by A.R.C Dallas, July 1850:91.

⁸⁹ Howard, *Island of Saints*, op.cit.:30.

⁹⁰ Marrable, *Rise and Progress*, op.cit., letter written by A.R.C. Dallas, February 1850:15.

⁹¹ Howard, *Island of Saints*, op.cit.:106-7.

⁹² Gregg, Rev. John, ‘A Missionary Visit to Achill and Erris and Other Parts of the County of Mayo’ (pamphlet), c.1850:19.

⁹³ Howard, *Island of Saints*, op.cit.:32.

⁹⁴ Plunket, *A Short Visit*, op.cit.: 132. Also see Howard, *ibid.*:177.

⁹⁵ Howard, *Island of Saints*, op.cit.:270.

⁹⁶ Ibid.:157.

⁹⁷ Ibid.:176. This was probably a Mass rock.

[...] ceremonies appeared plainly to have been copied from the rituals of primitive paganism'.⁹⁸ He notes that representations of heathen sacrifice always show a boy in attendance, suggesting that altar boys meet this heathen requirement in Catholic ceremonies.⁹⁹ Roadside images and altars too are presented as typically pagan.

Irish readers of missionary magazines a hundred years later, would have read that African Jujū involves idols, superstition, depravity, sacrifice, infanticide and cannibalism. Trial by poison is described and the worship of snakes, crocodiles, trees and, in a few places, cats, is mentioned.¹⁰⁰ There are '[m]idnight dramas enacted in blood instigated by the powers of hell'.¹⁰¹ A common factor in both discourses is the destruction of the 'old gods': 'After a procession around the town all the Catholics repeat their Baptismal promises, renounce the devil, and witness the burning of the jujū'.¹⁰² Wilson warns that 'Darkest Africa' is not a thing of the past. He advises his audience that if he listens to tales, he 'will retire to [his] bed convinced that it is still the land of mysteries and of weird, unaccountable practices, and that those who represent it as lightsome and manifest and progressive, display but a meagre acquaintance with its true life and customs'.¹⁰³ What is designated as heathen has less dignified ceremonies than the Christian. Both discourses describe a 'heathen' funeral, the African with shouting, loud wailing and an excess of emotion, in contrast with a dignified Christian burial.¹⁰⁴ The Catholic Irish funeral is condemned as 'pomp and parade'.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

Neither group of missionaries, whose representations I have briefly discussed, had the typical political coloniser:colonised relationship with their heathen target group. In the 1850s, the Irish were nominally part of the Union, but it is apparent that as a race they were viewed more in terms of a far-flung part of the Empire by the British who participated in the missionary endeavour. Irish Catholic missionaries were, by the 1920s, travelling from an independent, postcolonial, Ireland, to the remnants of the British Empire. They were not officially part of an imperial project, certainly not a British one, however it might be considered that Ireland had its own spiritual, imperial project.

Whether intentionally or not, the Proselytisers seem to have defined the Irish in terms of other colonised peoples. It is noticeable that the counterparts that occurred to them are racially rather than economically defined. Examples include Dallas who compared the Irish to sepoy,¹⁰⁶ and also described them as shouting 'like wild Indians' (on Boffin);¹⁰⁷ Plunket, whose descriptions were of 'wild peasants', 'aboriginal' people and 'crosslegged, Arab-like children';¹⁰⁸ Marrable mentions the

⁹⁸ Middleton, Conyers, 'A Letter from Rome showing the exact Conformity between Popery and Paganism; or, the religion of the present Romans, derived from that of their heathen ancestors' (pamphlet), Dublin, 1849:9-10.

⁹⁹ Ibid.:12.

¹⁰⁰ Jordan, *Bishop Shanahan*, op.cit.:205.

¹⁰¹ 'Our Departures', *The African Missionary*, 88(November-December 1928):230.

¹⁰² Mellett, *If Any Man Dare*, op.cit.:118.

¹⁰³ Wilson, 'Darkest Africa', *Pagan Missions*, V(September 1926):92.

¹⁰⁴ 'Liberian', 'Burying the Dead', *The African Missionary*, 83(January-February):132-4.

¹⁰⁵ Howard, *Island of Saints*, op.cit.:48.

¹⁰⁶ Dallas, Mrs, *Incidents*, op.cit.:441.

¹⁰⁷ Dallas, A.R.C., *A Mission Tour Book*, op.cit.:45.

¹⁰⁸ Plunket, *A Short Visit*, op.cit.:53, 32, 25.

Ganges;¹⁰⁹ Howard likened the Irish to ‘Thugs in India’;¹¹⁰ in the Achill mission, the clergyman, having decided to participate in ‘missionary operations [...] among the Greenlanders and other barbarous peoples’, chose to expend his energies on the Irish.¹¹¹ Whatever the official definition of the island, the native Irish population does not seem to be considered as part of the motherland, rather as an uncivilised outpost of empire.

The Irish Catholic missionaries were quite blatant in their colonisation of the African continent, with what they described as a Spiritual Empire. References to Ireland as mother to Africa confirm both the idea of motherland and the nurturing role that Ireland is represented as having.¹¹² However good their intentions, they happily defined themselves as the white man, in opposition to the black, and, quite possibly without malice, imposed Irish ideals on African people, asking supporters to ‘Help us to make poor abandoned Africa a Holy Ireland beyond the seas’.¹¹³ Secure in their own national identity, and separate from the materialistic British Empire, the Irish attempted to bring an edited version of civilisation, minus the materialistic corrupting elements, to Africa.

The significance of this discourse is that the texts produced by, and in support of the proselytisers in Ireland, were another authoritative account and description of the Irish to add to an already established series of stereotypes. The missionary accounts confirmed and supported the existing beliefs and therefore became a part of the anti-Irish wisdom of the day. Similarly, in 1920s Ireland there would have been very little known about Africa other than the adventure stories and travel narratives produced by the Empire, which would now have been supported by the texts emerging from the missions. It seems that the missionaries’ motivation was not sufficiently different to that of the Empire builder and their own propaganda needs determined the representations they produced, and consequently the overwhelming image they projected was of an uncivilised, childlike continent.

¹⁰⁹ Marrable, *The Rise and Progress*, op.cit.:43.

¹¹⁰ Howard, *Island of Saints*, op.cit.:27.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*:173.

¹¹² Editorial, *The African Missionary*, 88(November-December 1928):222.

¹¹³ ‘Auntie’s Playground’, *The African Missionary*, 80(July-August 1927):79.